

# Technical Assistance Bulletin

Office of Minority Health

Resource Center

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## You Can Manage Focus Groups Effectively for Maximum Impact

*Focus groups put you in touch with your audience and save time  
and money in the long run. Here's how to manage them.*

Focus groups are one of several ways to ask the people you want to reach — your target audience — what they think and how they feel about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. These small gatherings of 8 to 12 people

meet with a trained moderator to talk about program themes, messages, and products.

First used by companies marketing commercial products to explore consumer responses, focus groups now also help nonprofit groups plan health or social programs. In social marketing, the “prod-

uct” may be knowledge about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs or the skills to resist their use.

Whether you are contracting with an outside firm or managing the focus groups yourself, you must be able to direct the process.

Here is an overview of what focus group managers need to consider.

*How can you know that what you say about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs will mean what you want it to mean to the people you want to reach? The only way to find out is by asking them.*

### 1. Decide What You Want To Learn

The first step is to state your purpose clearly. You may want to learn whether a certain logo is “attention-getting,” whether a brochure with information about marijuana is “comprehensible” to preteens, whether a spokesperson telling young men about the dangers of alcohol is “believable,” whether actors in a video seem “personally relevant” to your audience. You may want to learn more about an audience’s “information sources” or obtain “direction” for a new program.

Focus groups can be used at several stages of a program:

- During preliminary planning to learn about your audience (supplementing more representative audience surveys)
- At the beginning of a campaign to test and compare concepts, such as several different campaign themes or images
- At the first- and second-draft stage before spending money and time on the final versions
- At the start of a new phase of a program to learn if existing materials are appropriate.

Meet with everyone in your organization who may be involved in the program you are planning to reach agreement on objectives. Those most involved in the outcome of the focus groups should plan to observe them.

## Before You Begin...

- Before you start planning focus groups, define your target audience and get some background information. A call to the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI) may, for example, turn up useful data or samples of materials pretested with audiences like yours.
- The more you know about your audience, the better able you will be to conduct a meaningful focus group discussion. And the insights you gain from all sources will help guide the entire communications process.

## 2. Decide How To Manage Each Task

You may hire a marketing research firm to manage the whole process, manage all of the tasks yourself, or use a combination of in-house staff work and outside help. For example, a firm might supply a trained moderator and facilities while you recruit participants. When making this decision, consider:

- Budget
- In-house capabilities and resources (staff time)
- Credibility of in-house reports
- Accessibility of your audience (how difficult to recruit)
- Target audience's attitude toward your agency
- Facilities available
- Scope of the project.

**When you consider using an outside firm** call other organizations that work on health and social issues and ask if they can recommend a marketing research or other firm that conducts focus groups. Directories also may be helpful (see the Resources list on page 6).

Contact several firms and ask about their experience, references, costs, recruiting procedures, and, perhaps most important, their moderators' qualifications. Ask about their experience with health and social issues and with your target audience.

**When negotiating a contract** pin down details such as timetables, special recruitment costs (the narrower the audience, the higher the costs), a guarantee of minimum number of participants (below which you will not pay the firm), a precise description of the final product and how revisions will be handled, and what will be done in case of equipment failure (if taping is important).

**When you consider managing tasks in-house** look for expert help (see the Resources list on page 6). For example, universities with marketing departments may have trained moderators who could help.

## 3. Develop a Discussion Guide

To guide the discussion, focus group moderators use an outline of major points they will cover. Discussion guides usually include opening remarks followed by general questions on the topic and then more specific or sensitive questions. Always review the final discussion guide with the moderator to establish which topics need special attention.

## 4. Decide How To Recruit Participants

People in focus groups should be like the people you want to reach — that is, they should

### **Focus groups can:**

- Provide insights into audience perceptions and concerns.
- Identify words or images with special connotations or sensitivities.
- Point out confusing phrases or images.
- Provide clues to what appeals to the audience.
- Identify sources of information.
- Provide a forum to air general concerns and reactions.
- Guide professional decisions.
- Help trigger creative thinking.

### **Focus groups cannot:**

- Provide data about an entire group of people, as do polls and surveys. If 8 of 10 people in a focus group like a poster, you cannot assume that 80 percent of the target audience will like it.
- Probe sensitive or complex issues with individuals, as do in-depth interviews.
- Substitute for professional judgment.
- Substitute for creativity.

be typical of your target audience. Choose between two basic recruitment methods:

- Calling organizations or institutions such as community groups, workplaces, churches, or schools.
- Calling individuals. In this method, the recruiter calls people listed in a telephone book or database and asks a few questions to determine whether they belong to the target audience. If so, the recruiter asks them to participate.

Plan to offer incentives for attending; a small fee, a meal, a gift, or a donation, if working with an organization, are common.

### **The ideal focus group moderator:**

- Has had special training in focus groups
- Will easily establish rapport with participants
- Will respond positively to all comments
- Will maintain a neutral role toward opinions shared about a particular topic
- Will not display any special knowledge of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs
- Will probe for reactions with sensitivity.

## **5. Define the Final Product**

Focus group reports take several forms. When a report is to be used by staff only (for example, to revise materials) you may need only an informal summary or no report at all; a meeting of those who observed may suffice. But if the report will form the basis for presentations or planning decisions, you will need a

more formal document. Don't forget to look for unexpected results. For example, when an educational comic book about drugs was pretested, children in focus groups talked a lot about an issue not addressed in the comic book at all — that older kids pushing drugs on



younger ones was “scary.” Common elements of full focus group reports include:

- **Background.** Who were the participants? How many attended? What was the purpose of the focus group?
- **Highlights.** Major points that emerged from discussion are summarized.
- **Findings.** Participants’ reactions to specific questions are described. Quotes illustrate points and give depth.
- **Interpretation or conclusions.** Patterns that emerged or significant differences between groups are analyzed. If no patterns are apparent, consider holding more groups, and review the discussion guide.
- **Recommendations.** Suggestions for modifying materials or planning a campaign, based on findings and conclusions, are presented.
- **Appendixes.** Copies of screening instrument (if recruiting was by telephone) and discussion guide are provided.

### *Case Study:*

#### **Gaining Insights Into Language**

Some words have slightly different meanings to different audiences, and nuances are important. Here is an excerpt from a focus group report that provided insights into the words used in an educational comic book.

- Instead of having Chris say “Drugs mess up your mind and body! They keep you from doing what you want,” have him say “Drugs mess up your mind and body! They keep you from doing what is right!” Several children noted that some kids may want to use drugs, whereas the concept of right and wrong is fully accepted at this age.
- Following Sam’s statement, Kate mentions that alcohol and other drugs make you feel clumsy. Several children mentioned that you can feel clumsy even when not using drugs and alcohol. Better words, suggested by the children, were “dizzy” or “confused.”

*Focus groups don’t need to be all talk; consider short questionnaire exercises at the beginning or end. When CSAP pretested a Kid’s Magazine, the moderators asked children in focus groups to circle words they did not understand. This exercise revealed that the words “tolerance,” “dependent,” and “coordination” should be made simpler.*

### *Case Study:*

#### **Developing Concepts and Direction**

When the National PTA decided to develop a comprehensive School/Parent/Child Prevention Program to prevent alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse, it first held focus groups with parents of preadolescent children. Moderators (1) explored issues, such as how parents talk to their children about drugs and sources of prevention information; (2) showed parents a variety of materials to elicit reaction to varying formats; and (3) asked parents to identify materials that would be useful to them.

Here are two examples of the many recommendations that emerged from the focus groups:

- Because parents said they rarely or never seek out information about alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs, the report recommended that the National PTA consider direct distribution of all materials to parents and that any meetings or events be heavily promoted through direct mail.
- Throughout the focus group discussions, parents responded favorably to the practical ideas they offered each other for dealing with difficult situations and to the specific tips provided in the materials they saw. The report therefore recommended that the new program provide practical, hands-on skills training.

## Money and Logistics

Focus groups are a relatively quick and low-cost research method. Allow about 4 to 6 weeks planning time and, very roughly, about \$1,000 to \$5,500 per focus group. Costs vary from place to place and from firm to firm. Money, time, and logistical considerations include:

**Development of a discussion guide.** Allow time to meet with everyone involved, write the guide, and rehearse it with the moderator.

**Recruitment.** Recruiting costs vary depending on the method used and on how difficult it is to find participants.

**Fees/gifts to participants.** A donation to a group may be substituted.

**Meeting room.** Community or office meeting rooms may be available at low or no cost.

**Observation facilities.** Marketing research firms generally have rooms with a one-way mirror behind which clients can observe focus groups unobtrusively. If you do not have

access to a one-way mirror, consider having a few observers sit in the room with participants, out of their line of sight and with special instructions to avoid interrupting the discussion. Another option is to attach the tape recorder to speakers in a neighboring room.

**Audiovisual equipment.** You will need a tape recorder and/or videotaping equipment to record the discussion; you also may need projectors and screens if pretesting audiovisual materials.

**Refreshments.** Light refreshments are common; full meals are sometimes provided as an incentive to participants.

**Moderator fee.** This varies from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars, depending partly on what is included. Some moderator fees include preparation of the discussion guide and report.

**Report.** Summary reports generally cost less than detailed reports.

### Case Study:

#### Revise, Pretest, and Revise Again

Consider pretesting materials at several stages of development. Focus groups helped guide the writing of a parents' booklet after both the first and second drafts, when parents in focus groups had comments like these.

##### **First draft:**

- Make the introduction more dramatic.
- Make the booklet shorter.
- Use realistic examples whenever possible.
- Make it clear that the question-and-answer section is meant for parents.

*Also use focus group findings for clues to new messages and materials. One program, when pretesting an educational comic book, found that children in focus groups enjoyed acting out the parts. The result was a new idea: a play about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs for elementary school classrooms.*



## Second draft

- The introduction was effective — especially the last paragraph.
- More examples, quotes, and case histories would be useful.
- Use “can” of beer and “glass” of wine instead of the number of ounces.
- The humor was effective, but the tone of some sections seemed condescending.

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## Resources

Advertising Research Foundation. *Focus Groups: Issues and Approaches*. This pamphlet is available from the foundation, 3 East 54th Street, New York, NY 10022, (212) 751-5656.

American Marketing Association. *Marketing Services Guide*. This guide, published annually, lists suppliers and services all over the United States and is available from the association, 250 South Wacker Drive, Suite 200, Chicago, IL 60606, (312) 648-0536.

CSAP Communications Team, 7200 Wisconsin Ave., Bethesda, MD 20814-4820. See box.

Funkhouser, J.E. Before the Cameras Turn: The Research Base of the Youth Alcohol Prevention Campaign. *Alcohol Health and Research World*, 1987; 11:44-47.

Greenbaum, Thomas L. *The Practical Handbook and Guide to Focus Group Research*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1987. A detailed guide to the field.

Marketing Research Association, 111 East Wacker Drive, Suite 600, Chicago, IL 60601, (312) 644-6610. Publishes audience research guidelines and interviewer training materials.

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI), P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20852, (301) 468-2600 or (800) 729-6686. Provides information on research literature, programs, and educational materials. Also ask about the Regional Alcohol and Drug Awareness Resource (RADAR) network, which may have a resource center in your region.

Office of Cancer Communications, National Cancer Institute. *Making Health Communication Programs Work: A Planners Guide*, 1989. This guide to all aspects of health communications, including focus groups, is available from OCC, Bethesda, MD 20892, (301) 496-5583 or (800) 422-6237.

Public Relations Society of America, 33 Irving Place, 3rd Floor, 15th and 16th Streets, New York, NY 10003. Ask about publications and local chapters' pro bono projects.

Rice, Ronald E., and Atkin, Charles K., eds. *Public Communication Campaigns*. Beverly Hills, CA, Sage, 1989.



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### Developed and Produced by the CSAP Communications Team.

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This bulletin is one in a series developed to assist programs that are working to prevent alcohol, tobacco, and other drug problems. We welcome your suggestions regarding information that may be included in future bulletins. For help in learning about your audience, developing messages and materials, and evaluating communication programs, contact the CSAP Communications Team, 7200 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 500, Bethesda, MD 20814-4820, (301) 951-3277.



